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DRINKIN' OF THE WINE

The swinging rhythm of the communion song, "Drinkin' of the Wine," made it a favorite with the chain-gang for cutting weeds along the highway. The afternoon I heard it sung by convicts in front of my house, there were no chains to be seen or heard. When I asked the guard the reason, he told me they were used only to enforce camp discipline. The prisoners had been on their good behavior that week, and the chains had been left off.

I mentioned the incongruity of wearing stripes[30] and singing spirituals. He laughed and said the prisoners got very religious while in camp. It is a fact, however, that the Negro takes his religion very seriously, and, given time for meditation—enforced though it be—quite naturally reacts in this way. Then, too, he apparently has a different concept of morality from white people, and in consequence the idea prevails among us that he does not put his religion into practice. But, for that matter, who does? Each race seems to have its own particular blind spot, and inability to recognize the sanctity of property appears to the white man to be the hereditary weakness of the Negroes in this country, as in Africa. Before the white man meddled with their lives, it was considered legitimate business for the inhabitants of one community to steal from another. Up to the time of the Emancipation Proclamation, I am told, many a slave held the ingenious idea that property could not steal from property. It is possible that this notion, coupled with the viewpoint inherited from Africa,[31] may account for the tolerance still shown by the Negro toward the light-fingered members of the race who run afoul of the law.

According to a *London Morning Post* correspondent at Nairobi, capital of Kenya: "To the native mind there is nothing morally wrong in thefts of stock from other natives and from European farmers." This is possibly the reason why it is hard to get our primitive Negro to see that it is wrong to take a chicken from the roost when he is hungry, or a shirt off the clothes-line when he is half-naked. The same

[30] *The "lifers" wear a plain drab suit and the lesser offenders, stripes. It should be the other way about. When convicts escape, as they often do, protective coloration gives the advantage to those who should not have it.*

[31] *In Astley's Collection, John Leo is quoted as saying that the Negroes on and between the Senegal and Gambia rivers lived in common. They had no property in land, but supported themselves in equal state, upon the natural produce of the country. Seagrave also comments on the fact there is no property in ground. The king's license is obtained and the people then go out in troops, and first clear the ground from bushes and weeds which they burn, "and so continue to work in a body for the public benefit, till every man's ground is tilled and sowed."*

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correspondent goes on to tell of the difficulties encountered by the Governor of Kenya in stamping out what we consider crime. "Imprisonment is found to be no deterrent. Nor among the Kikuyu does an ex-convict lose caste in the tribe. After he is released from jail the sacrifice of a single goat puts everything right. A new suit of a white tunic and shorts is thoroughly enjoyed by native prisoners for theft in East Africa. Fines are not always a success because the native, well-fed, housed and clothed at government expense, actually enjoys his term as a vacation."

Our own prison camp in Glynn County formerly offered an example of the same problem. A colored convict whose time was up pleaded with Mr. Higgenbotham—who was the court of last appeal at the camp—to be allowed to stay. A living being hard to get nowadays, he figured he could not provide for himself as well as the county did.[33] But the authorities were firm, and he was obliged to move on. Of course, he knew how to get back if times were too hard. It is the same with us, as in Africa, when it comes to any stigma being attached to a Negro who has served a term in jail or spent time on the chain-gang. Ex-convicts assume the same status in their community as they enjoyed before the county forcibly detained them.

Today the chain-gang is a thing of the past, and our roadsides and drainage ditches are neglected. No one need tell me that prison walls and ball-playing are proper substitutes for the healthy outdoor life that our convicts formerly led. There is a great deal of sentimentality connected with the discouragement of crime, and the abolition of the chain-gang is one of its manifestations. Of course there were abuses, but they also occur within prison walls—only there they are not so readily found out.

Chorus: Drinkin' of the wine—wine—wine
Drinkin' of the wine
O—yes—my Lord.
I oughta bin to Heaven ten thousand years
Drinkin' of the wine.

[33] *My corner was for years the favorite resting-place at noon for the convicts when they worked on the island. I saw the substantial rations served them, and it is no wonder the discharged convict felt he could go farther and fare worse. I also observed that the model prisoners were well treated. One day I overheard a guard say very hospitably to one of my Negro singers, who was working for me: "Want to come back?" With a good-humored chuckle, the man replied: "No, thank you." It seems that he had been mixed up in a drinking affair in which a knife had figured. He told me he had run away, but had found the world a hard place to live in—so he had come home, surrendered, and taken his medicine. The guard said he had been a star prisoner.*

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Eatin' of the bread—bread—bread
Eatin' of the bread—O yes my Lord.
I oughta bin to Heaven ten thousand years
Drinkin' of the wine.

(repeat chorus)

If my mother ask for me
Tell her Death done summon' me.
I oughta bin to Heaven ten thousand years
Drinkin' of the wine.

(repeat chorus)

If y'u get there before I do
Tell my Lord I'm comin' too.
I oughta bin to Heaven ten thousand years
Drinkin' of the wine.

(repeat chorus)

Ain' but one thing I done wrong
Stayin' in the wilderness mos' too long.
I oughta bin to Heaven ten thousand years
Drinkin' of the wine.

(repeat chorus)

WHEN I'M GONE TO COME NO MO'

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Nobody but a Negro could employ such entrancing elaborations as occur in the singing of "Gone—gone—gone," and no transcription could possibly give it. Our musical method is opposed to that of the Negro, and, try as we may, we cannot achieve his strange inflections, nor place emphasis as he does. A song may appear perfectly simple, but try to learn it, and the simplicity vanishes.

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The first time I heard this song, a gang of Glynn County convicts was using its rhythm to heave great clods of black earth out of the tide-water creek behind my house. The leader was such an excellent singer that I asked the guard how soon he was due to be free. The man did not have much more time to serve, his record on the gang was good, and his last offense was nothing more than taking a stool he fancied from an office; but he was a repeater. He just could not leave other people's property alone. Even though I coveted his voice, obligation to the community would not permit me to encourage his presence on the island.